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Developments in Indochina



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State Dept. review completed



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DEVELOPMENTS IN INDOCHINA

(Information as of 1500)

SOUTH VIETNAM

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The government is talking more optimistically about the situation at Tonle Cham. The Democracy Party will have its first national convention this week and plans to enter village election contests beginning this May. Secretary-General Waldheim is now faced with a formal request from the PRG for an office at the UN and a formal memorandum from his Secretariat advising against such a move.

LAOS

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Skirmishing continues along Route 13. In the area of the Plaine des Jarres, the Communists are improving the roads before the onset of the rainy season. The Pathet Lao will release nine US prisoners in Hanoi on 28 March.

CAMBODIA

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The insurgents are still entrenched near Neak Luong, and the regular Mekong convoy has delayed its departure from South Vietnam. The Chinese gave a party honoring the third anniversary of Sihanouk's FUNK, but Sihanouk and his top ministers—and Chou En-lai—were all absent.

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SOUTH VIETNAM

The Military Situation

The Communists have resumed pressure against the Tonle Cham ranger camp, but the government's fear that the camp will be overrun is now fading. Sufficient ammunition and foodstuffs are being airdropped inside the camp, and morale is reported high both at Tonle Cham and at Rach Bap farther south. The defenders of both camps are rejecting Communist offers of safe passage.

In the delta, Communist shellings and ground actions have eased somewhat in Chau Doc and Kien Phong provinces along the Cambodian border, but the return of the ICCS team to Tri Ton is uncertain. The Hungarians now say they will send a new team to Tri Ton on 26 March but the Poles are still reluctant until all four parties guarantee their security and assure their freedom of movement.

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Democracy Partu

The government's Democracy Party is preparing for a national convention in Saigon on 28 and 29 March. President Thieu apparently will address a large public rally at the inaugural ceremony on 29 March.

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have been trying to line up prominent figures from the country's major political and religious groups to serve as an advisory body. Among those approached were Farmer-Worker Party leader Tran Quoc Buu and Progressive Nationalist Movement leader Nguyen Ngoc Huy, both of whom are now trying to set up a rival Social Democratic Alliance. The Democracy Party did gain an important new recruit recently when Military Region 1 commander General Truong agreed

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to join. Truong had previously refused on the grounds that the military should not engage in partisan politics, but according to the US Embassy, he now has signed up in order to obtain Saigon's concurrence in personnel shifts he considers vital to MR 1.

The Democracy Party is preparing to participate in the elections for village councils, beginning in May. One party official in the delta told the embassy that the Democracy Party would not try to monopolize all of the seats in the more secure areas, where other non-Communist candidates would be competing. In less pacified villages, however, local officials are to head off any possible victories by Communist sympathizers by seeing that Democracy Party candidates win all of the council seats.

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The PhG Still Trying at the UN

Late last week Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim reportedly received a Provisional Revolutionary Covernment letter requesting a New York liaison office, and also a Secretariat memorandum opposing that request.

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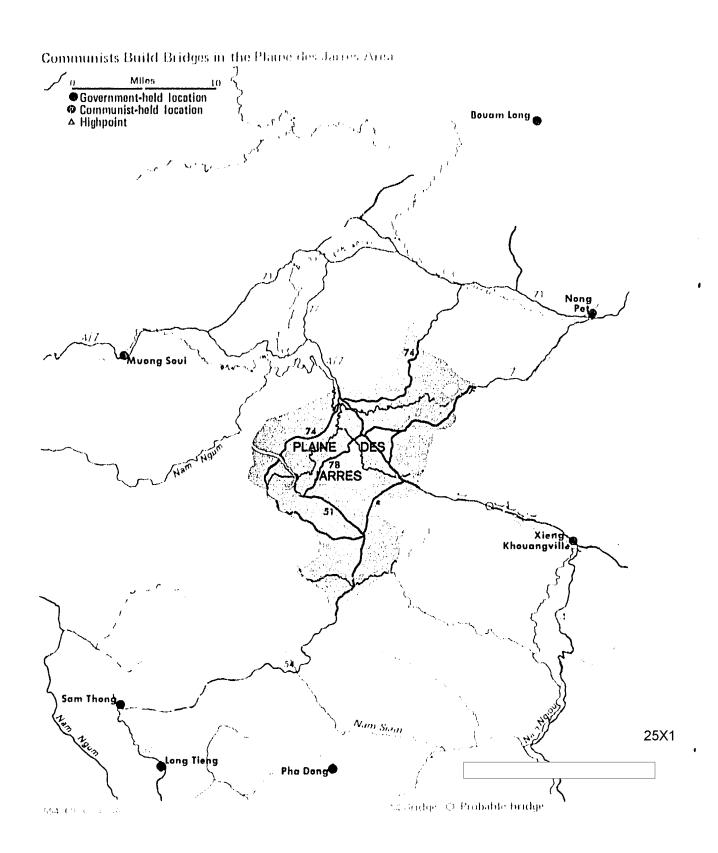
Earlier, UN Legal Adviser Stavropoulus also cautioned Waldheim against hasty action in this direction, although he found no legal barrier to the New York office. Despite strong US objections, Waldheim has continued to explore the PRG application, contending that it is essential if the UN is to play a role in Vietnam relief projects. He may now be forced to take some definite, and most likely negative, action.

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LAOS

The Military Situation

The only significant combat on 25 March occurred in the central panhandle where government and Communist units continued to skirmish for control of villages near Route 13 southeast of Thakhek. Aerial photography reveals that the North Vietnamese are making a major effort to improve roads in the area of the Plaine des Jarres. They are building numerous bridges and grading and ditching, apparently in order to keep the roads open for local troop movement and resupply activity after the rainy season begins in mid-May.

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Pathet Lao to Release US POWs

The Lao Communists on 26 March officially informed the US Embassy in Vientiane that American prisoners captured in Laos would be released to US authorities in Hanoi on 28 March. The spokesman claimed that the Lao Communists hold only the nine US prisoners named on the list released 1 February. The official said the Pathet Lao would cooperate in clarifying the status of US personnel listed as missing in Laos, but that detailed discussions on this matter would have to await agreement on a military protocol for Laos.

No forward movement was reported at the meeting of the political subcommittee in Vientiane on 26 March. Discussions centered on the formation of the Joint National Political Council and the neutralization of Vientiane and Luang Prabang. Following the session, a Communist official said that second-ranked negotiator Phoune Sipraseuth would probably return to Vientiane on 27 March, but had nothing to say about the return of chief negotiator Phoumi Vongvichit.

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CAMBODIA

The Military Situation

The government operation to reopen Route 1 between Phnom Penh and Neak Luong has made only limited headway. Cambodian troops on 25 March recaptured two positions on the west bank of the river near the Neak Luong ferry crossing, but could move no farther up the highway. The regular Mekong convoy, scheduled to arrive in Phnom Penh on 27 March, has indefinitely postponed its departure from South Vietnam because of the insecure situation in the Neak Luong area.

A section of Route 4 north of the port of Kompong Som also remains closed. Initial government efforts on 25 March to reopen the highway were repulsed by well-entrenched insurgents. A government brigade from Kompong Som has been ordered to help clear Route 4, but at last report had not begun to move.

Sihanouk's Third Anniversary

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In a message on 23 March marking the founding of Sihanouk's National United Front of Kampuchea (FUNK) three years ago, Premier Chou En-lai and Acting Party Chairman Tung Pi-Wu strongly supported Sihanouk and the Cambodian "liberation struggle" and predicted an early end to the Lon Nol government. A People's Daily editorial on the same day echoed Sihanouk's statement on 27 February that "the Cambodian problems stem from US intervention and aggression." The Chinese leaders did not specifically say that Sihanouk's five-points were the only solution to the Cambodian conflict, but they endorsed the general goals of Sihanouk's statement and implied that Peking expects the insurgents to make additional gains on the battlefield.

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The Chinese held the customary reception in Peking to commemorate the anniversary, but Sihanouk, FUNK "Minister from the Interior" leng Sary, "Prime Minister" Penn Nouth, and Chou En-lai were missing. The absence of leng Sary and Penn Nouth will generate more speculation that Sihanouk has returned to the "liberated zone."

Moscow gave its customary low-key propaganda treatment to the anniversary. As in past years, no mention was made of Sihanouk. A new theme in this year's propaganda is the need to restore peace in Cambodia.

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